

HOMOPHOBIA IN WISCONSIN SCHOOLS:
PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

by

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ABSTRACT

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Homophobic attitudes and discriminatory actions are problematic issues that schools are confronted with on a daily basis. Students that are believed to be homosexual are verbally assaulted and sometimes physically abused. Similar actions are taken against students whose parents or siblings are gay. The entire school community, consisting of teachers, students, parents, administrators, and counselors, may all be involved in the continuation of homophobia in the school.

The purpose of this study was to investigate strategies and resources schools utilize to prevent or reduce homophobia in Wisconsin schools. The investigator conducted a structured phone interview with a limited sample of high school and middle school counselors throughout Wisconsin to determine what action schools take to enforce the freedom of sexual orientation.

The findings of this study illustrated prevention and intervention strategies school districts use to combat homophobia. These strategies were examined at both the high school and middle school levels. School districts may use this information to adapt or improve their own systems.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

It has been commonly accepted that approximately 10% of the United States population are predominantly gay or lesbian. This figure is based on Alfred Kinsey's studies conducted in the 1940s and 1950s (Marcus, 1993). Because approximately 1 in 10 people in our society is gay or lesbian, it may be assumed that around 10% of adolescent students are gay males or lesbians as well.

Adolescence is marked as a time of exploration, commitment, evaluation, and of finding one's identity. Therefore, adolescence plays an important role in the awareness of sexual orientation. According to Santrock (1996), a study conducted in 1993 concluded that the average age homosexual boys realized they were gay was 12.5 years. Herdt and Boxer (1993) further report that boys engaged in their first same-sex encounter at the age of 13.1 years. Most of the participants in these studies reported feeling confused and upset at the onset of their homosexual feelings. Societies' norms and values may be to blame.

The American culture stigmatizes homosexuality. Many feel that same-sex relationships are unnatural and sinful. There are beliefs that AIDS is a plague sent by God to eliminate homosexuals. Other people believe that homosexuals suffer from mental illnesses and are curable of their "disorder". Still others hold beliefs that gay and lesbian people are more likely to molest children than are heterosexuals. The statistics indicate, however, that

sexual-abuse crimes are most likely committed by heterosexuals— usually men abusing girls (Chandler, 1997). Overall, there are many mistaken beliefs in the American realm of society that regard homosexuality as a negative way of life.

This most likely has damaging effects on the adolescents who are struggling with their sexual orientation. Hyde and Forsyth (1994) suggest that “it is virtually impossible to grow up without becoming at least somewhat homophobic” (p. 10). The growth and development of adolescents in this society makes them susceptible to internalizing some of these negative beliefs. Gonsiorek (1993) reveals that “one of the greatest impediments to the mental health of gay and lesbian individuals is ‘internalized homophobia’” (p. 474). According to Barkai (1996) internalized homophobia may be defined as “homophobia which is directed against the self because one senses and consequently fears one’s own element of homosexuality” (p. 10). Adolescents have heard and even spoken such anti-gay remarks as “you are so gay”, “what a fag”, and “you dyke” – each of which involves extremely negative connotations in these contexts. Adolescents know that their homosexuality is negatively regarded by society. In consequence, many homosexual teens become invisible members of society.

Some homosexual adolescents choose to hide their sexual orientation. Hiding one’s sexual orientation, however, can create a painful discrepancy between public and private identities. Consequently, they “ may feel inauthentic, that they are living a lie, and that others would not accept them if they knew the truth” (Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991, p. 74).

Other individuals, however, find that they are not able to hide their sexual orientations. These people get teased and ridiculed because of their mannerisms. They violate societies' gender roles. For example, females who display masculine characteristics and males who display feminine characteristics are often thought to be homosexual. Whether or not they indeed have affectionate feelings for people of the same sex is another matter. These people are tormented and ridiculed often on a daily basis because of the way they act and sometimes because of the way they dress. Much of this occurs in the education system.

Herek and Berrill (1992) report that " anti-gay prejudice and violence are serious problems at many colleges and universities" (p. 32). Their evidence reveals that over 1,300 anti-gay actions were reported by lesbian and gay groups on forty college campuses alone in 1990. The perpetrators of these homophobic actions are often young males ages twenty-one and under. A study conducted by Van de Ven (1994) revealed that high school students, however, may be even more homophobic than undergraduates when considering certain variables.

According to Chandler (1997), a New York State study investigating bias-related violence found that " junior and senior high school students were most disapproving of gays, more so than of any other minority group. Remarks about homosexuals were often 'openly vicious'" (p. 42). Pollack and Schwartz (1995) warn that " name-calling is harassment

regardless of who does it, and it is considered a hate crime by the federal government" (p. 73). Adolescents are also being punched, kicked, pushed, and beaten because of their homosexual status. Statistics reveal that sixty-five percent of gay males and lesbians experience verbal or physical assault in high schools (Littig & Long, 1995). Thirty-three to forty-nine percent of respondents in another study conducted in nine United States cities in Maine, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania experienced anti-gay threats, harassment, and/or violence while in high school or junior high school (Herek & Berrill, 1992).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the strategies and resources schools utilize to prevent or reduce homophobia in a select number of Wisconsin public schools.

The studies concerning homophobia in the school system have revealed that there are problems that need to be addressed. Homophobic beliefs are prominent in high schools and middle schools which often result in a percentage of students going to school without feeling accepted, valued, or safe. The results of this study may provide valuable information about the homophobic feelings and actions of high school students, and the various strategies that are being utilized to prevent and reduce homophobia.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

The literature review will focus on the topics of sexual orientation, homophobia, and the effects of homophobia on gay and lesbian adolescents. Prevention and intervention strategies that may be used in the school system will also be addressed.

Sexual Orientation

Pollack and Schwartz (1995) define sexual orientation as the gender or genders a person has feelings of attraction and affection toward. Additionally, it refers to " behaviors, emotions, fantasies, attitudes, self-identification, and sexual and life-style preferences regarding one's choice of intimate partners" (Fassinger,

1991, p. 158). Sexual orientation ranges from heterosexuality (having affectionate feelings for people of the opposite sex), homosexuality (having feelings of affection for people of the same sex), and bisexuality (having feelings of attraction towards both men and women). Owens (1998) reveals that sexual orientation is not a choice. Rather, it is a sense of inner identity.

For some time, the issue over whether homosexual and bisexual orientations are "normal" has been debated. There are those who believe that homosexuality is a normal orientation. One argument is that homosexuality has always existed. According to Bullough (1979), "homosexuality existed in ancient Egypt, in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, in ancient China, and in ancient India" (p. 2). Another argument stressing the normality of homosexuality is that homosexual behavior occurs in many different species of the animal kingdom and many different cultures as well. For example, most South American indigenous peoples consider homosexuality to be normal, healthy, and accepted (Owens, 1998). Others, however, believe that homosexuality is wrong and deviates from the norm.

According to Hyde and Forsyth (1994), although the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a diagnosis of mental illness in 1973, many people still believe that homosexuality is a sickness and should be classified as a disorder. Other people cite religious beliefs as a reason not to accept homosexuality. Many

religious institutions believe homosexuality is sinful, immoral, and a threat to the "traditional" American family.

Homophobia

For whatever reasons a person chooses not to accept homosexuality, homophobia is often the result. According to Pollack and Schwartz (1995), homophobia is the "irrational fear, dislike, or hatred of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals" (p. 49). Hyde and Forsyth (1994) further suggest that prejudice against homosexuals is that last acceptable prejudice in the United States. In fact, the United States remains one of the most hostile modern western societies toward homosexuals (Owens, 1998). The wrath of this homophobia is apparent in the armed services, in civilian employment, and in educational settings.

According to Gonsiorek and Weinrich (1991), discrimination against gay men and lesbians is institutionally supported in the military. Those who are suspected of homosexuality are often intensely interrogated. The military has dishonorably discharged many homosexuals based solely on their sexual orientation. Marcus (1993) indicates reasons the military has given for excluding homosexuals from the services. They include: security risks (homosexuals could be blackmailed by threatening to reveal their lifestyle); the impairment of discipline, morale, and cohesiveness among troops; and the uncomfortable feelings

heterosexuals may have that someone is watching them. A 1989 study conducted by the Pentagon concluded, however, that homosexuals do not present greater security risks and do not disrupt the armed forces (Marcus, 1993).

Homophobia also occurs in civilian employment. Many homosexuals fear the loss of their jobs if they reveal their homosexuality. In many places "it is perfectly legal to fire someone simply because he or she is gay" (Marcus, 1993, p. 103). Morgan and Brown (1993) further report a 1987 study that concluded three-fourths of lesbians surveyed believed they would lose their jobs or income if they disclosed their lesbian identity.

Homophobia not only affects the military and employment sectors of society, but the schools as well. Schools, where diversity and pluralism are ideally cherished, instead often perpetuate homophobia in American society.

The effects of homophobia most likely begin as early as in the elementary school. Gonsiorek (1993) reveals that names such as "queer" and "fag" are used as put-downs. Even at this age, homosexual labels are given negative connotations. According to Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995), the meanings of the terms, however, are often not understood.

As children grow older and enter adolescence, name-calling intensifies and gains meaning. Gonsiorek (1993) reveals that "during adolescence, individuals are more polarized in their sex roles than at any other time in their

lives" (p. 473). Males experience pressures to be "tough" while females experience pressures to be "passive".

Individuals who do not conform to these roles, whether or not they are homosexual, are often subjected to taunts and verbal abuse. These acts positively reinforce heterosexual orientations while portraying homosexuality in a negative way.

Although schools are thought to be safe learning environments, statistics reveal otherwise. Gay and lesbian youth are frequent targets of violence (Herek & Berrill, 1992). According to Hunter (1990), over half of gay and lesbian youth report regular verbal abuse while approximately 35 percent report physical assaults from their peers. Owens (1998) reveals that constant verbal abuse associated with homophobia can become intolerable. Students may find it all but impossible to experience classroom success.

Effects of Homophobia on Adolescents

Adolescents have been raised in a homophobic culture. The harassment and violence that develops from these beliefs further impedes the progress of homosexual rights. Adolescents who may be struggling with their sexual identity develop an awareness of being different. They quickly learn that they are negatively regarded by society. The consequences of this can be devastating.

According to D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993), more than half of gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens and young

adults fear disclosing their sexual orientation to their families. Of those who do disclose their homosexuality, twenty-six percent are thrown out of their homes by parents (Littig & Long, 1995). Gonsiorek (1993) further reports that homosexual adolescents "are rejected, mistreated, or become the focus of the family's dysfunction" (p. 473).

According to Littig and Long (1995), the anti-homosexual harassment that adolescents endure in schools results in a twenty-eight percent drop out rate. Adolescents are forced to drop out of high school simply because their sexual orientation is rejected.

The lack of support that struggling adolescents receive from peers and family often has disturbing results. According to Mastoon (1997), some adolescents feel so hopeless and terrified that ending their lives seems to be the only option. Hyde and Forsyth (1994) reveal that homosexual adolescents are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth. Thirty percent of all suicides each year are completed by lesbian and gay youth (Littig & Long, 1995). Remafedi, Farrow, and Deisher (1993) reveal that "risk factors include 'coming out' at a young age, gender atypicality, low self-esteem, substance abuse, running away, involvement in prostitution, and other psychosocial morbidities" (p. 487).

Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Homophobic language and violence are a reality in American schools. Owens (1998) reveals that American schools continue to remain one of the most homophobic institutions in the United States. Children are ostracized because they look, dress, or act different. Prevention strategies may be useful to develop support for gay and lesbian youth in the school system.

Homosexual youth may benefit from support groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances. According to Bennett (1997), these groups serve as a safe place for gay and straight students to discuss sexual orientation issues. They have been a major influence in helping teens create openly gay lives. Support groups are beneficial to students because they allow students to develop social skills, find support and understanding from peers, discuss sexuality, share information, and socialize (Gonsiorek, 1993).

It may be useful to train educators and counselors about homosexuality. School adults often set standards for behaviors and attitudes in schools. Yet many gay and lesbian students believe teachers and counselors to be unconcerned, insensitive, ill informed, and detached when addressing homosexual issues (Owens, 1998). Herdt and Boxer (1993) assert that teachers are not typically viewed as sources of protection or assistance. Therefore, it may be useful to provide information to counselors and educators about homosexuality and homophobia. Knowledgeable

presenters, written resources, relevant media, and small group discussions may all contribute to successful inservices for school staff.

Training educators and counselors may also help reduce homophobia by easing homosexuality into the classroom curriculum. Homosexual adolescents and those struggling with any sexual orientation issues in their family or friends would likely benefit from a curriculum that includes education about the homosexual population. Hyde and Forsyth (1994) reveal that education about gay men and lesbians continues to be uncommon in schools. Homosexuality is often limited to sex education courses. It may be helpful to incorporate gay and lesbian issues into history, family living, literature, and civil rights courses as well. Reading and writing assignments, class presentations, and class discussions about current gay events may help encourage students analyze their own perceptions of homosexuality and how homophobia has impacted their lives.

Homophobia in schools may be prevented or reduced when adults in schools stop hurtful language and provide visible support. According to Bennet (1997), ninety-seven percent of students have heard anti-gay comments such as "you are so gay" without a response from teachers. On occasion, teachers have been heard contributing their own anti-homosexual jokes or comments (Owens, 1998). Therefore, being proactive in classrooms and hallways may help to prevent hurtful language. "Name it, claim it, stop it" is

a method that teachers and counselors have adopted to address negative terminology attacking homosexuality.

Providing visible support may also be helpful for students. Support may include the presence of library books, outside speakers, drama presentations, gay-friendly symbols and posters, brochures and information packets, and peer-leader training. Any one of these methods may be positive ways to indicate to adolescents that homosexuality is normal and accepted in their school.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the strategies and resources schools utilize to prevent or reduce homophobia in a select number of Wisconsin public schools.

The objectives of this study are to determine what strategies and resources are available at the middle and high school levels, and to investigate what actions schools take to enforce the freedom of sexual orientation.

Instrumentation

A structured telephone interview (Appendix A) was developed by the researcher to gather information on prevention and intervention strategies. The questionnaire consisted of seven interview questions. The researcher designed the questionnaire to assess counselors' perceptions of the number of homosexuals in their school community, the awareness of homophobic feelings or actions against homosexuals, the intervention process involved at the administrative level, and the strategies and resources available to prevent or reduce homophobia in the school.

Participants

The researcher obtained a list of all Wisconsin public high schools involved in the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association from the web address <http://www.wiaawi.org/cgi/wiaadata.pl?directory>. The WIAA

divided schools into small, medium, and large districts according to their enrollment census figures. The researcher randomly selected a total of eighteen school districts to participate in the study. The schools included six large, six medium, and six small districts. Schools were further divided into three high schools and three middle schools within each of the six districts. The researcher randomly selected schools from the following districts to participate:

Belmont School District – small	Hilbert School District – small
New Auburn School District – small	Princeton School District – small
White Lake School District – small	Wonewoc School District – small
Algoma School District – medium	Colby School District – medium
Lake Mills School District – medium	Mosinee School District – medium
Mount Horeb School District – medium	Pardeeville School District – medium
Green Bay School District – large	Brookfield School District – large
Burlington School District – large	New Richmond School District – large
Oconomowoc School District – large	Sheboygan School District – large

A counselor from each of the school districts was asked to participate in this study. Eighteen counselors answered the prepared survey questions.

Research Procedures

The researcher called counselors from the selected public schools in April and May of 2000. The researcher provided an explanation of the survey, and assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity. After participants provided their informed consent as participating volunteers, the researcher initialed and dated the consent forms.

Participants provided information for this study by answering questions from a seven-item phone questionnaire developed by the researcher. Upon completion of the phone survey, counselors were provided an opportunity to relate observations, opinions, or questions they had.

Data Analysis

The information that counselors provided was formatted and examined to determine what prevention and intervention strategies are being utilized to help prevent or reduce homophobia in Wisconsin public schools. The researcher examined information from counselors from high school and middle school levels, as well as information based on school size.

CHAPTER IV

Results

The objectives of this study are to determine what strategies and resources are available at the middle and high school levels to prevent or reduce homophobia, and to investigate what action schools take to enforce the freedom of sexual orientation. Nine middle school and nine high school counselors participated in this study. This population of counselors included those employed by six small, six medium, and six large-sized school districts.

Middle School

Five counselors revealed that they knew of gay men or lesbians in their school community—including parents, teachers, students, administration, or counselors. Four counselors were unaware of any person in their school community who could be described as homosexual.

All nine counselors revealed that some level of homophobia was evident in their school. For example, students often used language that negatively portrayed homosexuality. Students used words such as “fag” and “queer” in each school. According to counselors, the response from teachers varied. Some teachers approached students and

indicated the inappropriate use of those words. Most middle school teachers, it seemed, did not address the issue.

The response of counselors varied as well. One counselor indicated that there was a very low level of homophobia in his/her school. When asked if students used the words “fag” or “queer”, he/she replied, “Oh yes! These words are used on a daily basis. But kids are just saying the words. They are not relating them to a gay person.” Other counselors

approached the negative use of language differently. Three counselors indicated that they immediately explained the inappropriate use of those words and told students to stop saying negative things. Physical violence has also been an issue in some Wisconsin middle schools.

In one school, students were thrown into lockers if they were suspected to be homosexual. Confrontations occurred in classrooms as well. The counselor once found a boy crying and hiding under a table. The boy told him that other boys harassed him in the locker room. At another school, a counselor revealed that a student was assumed gay and was physically harassed. The evidence of homophobia at the middle school level is apparent.

At every school that was interviewed, there was a sexual harassment policy. Most counselors indicated that if a student harassed another student, the principal or counselor talked with that person about inappropriate language and behavior. They warned that if the behavior continued, the student would be expelled from school, and in some cases, charges would be filed. Thus far, no student has ever been expelled from any of the nine middle schools due to homophobic sexual harassment.

Counselors indicated various strategies and resources utilized in their schools to prevent or reduce homophobia. In one middle school, a gay-lesbian panel presented information to teachers about homosexuality and homophobia. Teachers were required to attend the seminar.

Six schools incorporated classes into their curriculum to cover the subject of homosexuality. One school included a "Family Living" course that examined the feelings

of all people involved when homosexuality became an issue. Another school included a “Teen Issues” class that focused on communication skills and defined offensive terminology. Three counselors indicated that their health classes “probably” covered homosexuality. In a “Human Growth and Development” class, the topic was “touched on”. One counselor covered homosexuality during classroom guidance. Two counselors revealed there were no classes covering homosexuality in their school.

Two counselors suggested that their schools provided visible support by displaying reading materials as another prevention and intervention strategy. In one school, the library had materials that covered general differences among people. A guidance office in another school had “a few booklets directly related to homosexuality.”

There were various outside agencies that two counselors believed to be useful. One counselor suggested the Violence Intervention Project from their community. The other counselor indicated hospitals as resources, and a gay youth hotline for students to call. Two counselors indicated that they had no community resources to benefit from concerning homosexuality.

Three schools incorporated themes into their school strategies. Two schools used “Respect and Tolerance” as themes. In another school, a theme entitled “Is it Flirting or Hurting?” addressed general harassment to students at the beginning of the school year. Homosexuality was indirectly addressed with these themes.

To review, middle school strategies that have been used to prevent or reduce homophobia include: teacher inservices, classes in the curriculum, visible support such as reading materials, outside agencies, and school themes.

High School

Five high school counselors indicated their awareness of gay or lesbian members of their school community. Four counselors were unaware of any person in their school community who could be described as homosexual.

All nine counselors revealed that some level of homophobia was evident in their schools. One counselor revealed that students displayed feelings of non-acceptance, lack of tolerance, and misunderstanding toward homosexuals. The counselor heard a student that day exclaim, "I want to be a police officer so I can beat up all the gay guys!"

Counselors indicated that students are often picked on verbally. In one high school, two young men dropped out within the last two years because they were teased and harassed on a daily basis. Homophobia also involved posters about homosexuality being ripped down or written on, graffiti on notebooks, notes shoved in lockers, and vandalism of lockers and belongings. Three of the nine counselors warned that homophobia may exist among staff as well. One counselor voiced that "some teachers are so tied up in their own beliefs that they end up shutting kids out."

Counselors from all nine schools indicated that the school sexual harassment policy would be followed if harassment occurred. Students would be asked to identify who harassed them, what exactly was said or done, and to provide names of witnesses. School officials would approach the source(s) of the harassment, and warn them of parent notification, suspension, and legal action if the behavior continued.

Other strategies were used to combat homophobia in schools as well. One high school was in the process of developing a Gay-Straight Alliance. Three high schools used presentations and other informative methods to address homosexuality and homophobia.

For example, in one school a college theatre group conducted a program on sexual harassment. In another school, a Safe Staff program was incorporated. School staff attended the program on a voluntary basis. They received stickers that indicated they were safe people to talk to about homosexual issues. In another school, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Gay-Straight Alliance representatives educated faculty about homophobia.

Six high schools incorporated classes such as “Sociology”, “Health”, “American Studies”, “Decision-Making”, and “Conflict-Resolution” to address homosexuality and homophobia. One counselor included homosexuality as a topic during classroom guidance. Another counselor indicated that no courses were offered in their district.

Two counselors indicated they used visible support to address homosexuality. Posters, rainbows, and Safe Staff stickers were displayed in school classrooms and hallways to proclaim their support. Six counselors revealed that community agencies were utilized as well. One school district employed a counselor from an outside agency to address certain issues. Students attended teen support groups in nearby communities in two of the schools that were interviewed. One counselor indicated that there were no community resources that would be valuable to address homosexuality. Last, two high schools incorporated themes of “Tolerance of Difference” to address homosexuality.

In summary, high schools utilized a variety of prevention and intervention strategies to prevent or reduce homophobia. They included: a Gay-Straight Alliance, presentations and other informative methods, classes in the curriculum, visible support such as posters and stickers, community agencies, and school themes.

School Size

Among the six counselors from small schools, two could identify a homosexual member of their school community. Homophobia in the small schools ranged from some tolerance to complete non-acceptance. In one school, homosexuals were not targeted, rather African Americans were. Small schools used a variety of prevention methods to prevent or reduce homophobia. Two schools used community agencies, four included classes in the curriculum, and two incorporated classroom guidance.

Among the counselors from medium size schools, four could identify homosexual members of their school community. Counselors indicated that name-calling occurred, but was not targeted to one specific person thought to be gay. Vandalism occurred at one medium-sized school. Homophobia was prevented or reduced using various methods that differed slightly from small schools. Four schools included classes in the curriculum, three empowered a school theme, three utilized community agencies, and two provided information to faculty and students. One school incorporated four strategies into their school. Another school did not provide any methods to address homosexuality and homophobia.

Four counselors from large schools could identify homosexual members of their school community. The homophobia expressed by students from large schools did not differ from small or medium size schools. One counselor revealed that some boys became nervous if they sat too close, and students participated in more verbal abuse than physical. Large schools utilized similar methods to combat homophobia. Four schools included classes in the curriculum, three utilized community agencies, three provided information to faculty and students, and one was forming a Gay-Straight Alliance.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Adolescence is marked as a time of exploring one's sexual identity. This can be a very difficult process, especially for students who think they may be homosexual. Potential gay and lesbian students are socialized, as are all students, to believe that same-sex preferences are wrong and immoral. It is important to offer students who are struggling with homosexuality many different resources that help provide accurate information and supportive services.

The results of this study were consistent with the literature in that the selected schools provided limited services concerning homosexuality. It seems that homophobia is alive and well in Wisconsin schools, yet resources are not available to address it. Of the eighteen Wisconsin school districts that were interviewed, only one had a Gay-Straight Alliance, four provided teacher inservices, twelve taught homosexuality units in the class curriculum, four provided visible support, eight utilized community agencies, and five incorporated school themes. Twelve out of eighteen districts providing units on homosexuality may seem appropriate. It must be taken into consideration, however, that two counselors "guessed" that their health classes covered homosexuality, one counselor's school "touched on" the topic, and another school provided a class in which harassment (not necessarily homophobia or homosexuality) was covered.

In many schools, homosexuality seems to be addressed under different categories. For example, schools believe they are covering the issue of homosexuality with classes that cover harassment and school themes that emphasize "tolerance and respect". Schools must use caution when doing this, however. Owens (1998) reveals that "when schools

attempt to promote and respect individual diversity, the term usually applies to racial/ethnic or religious differences. Notably absent are differences in sexual orientation” (p. 2).

Homosexual students and staff do indeed exist in Wisconsin schools. It is alarming, however, that many school counselors did not know a single homosexual in their school community—including parents, teachers, students, administration, and counselors. Some of the schools included over 1,000 students, which statistically indicates that one hundred of them are gay or lesbian. There may be several reasons that counselors were unable to identify homosexual students in their school. First, statistics may need to be reevaluated. Kinsey’s report that 10% of the United States population are gay or lesbian may simply be inaccurate. Second, students may not be “coming out” for fear of possible negative consequences of others knowing their sexual orientation. In addition, students may not view their counselors as sources of support. This last suggestion supports Owens’ (1998) findings that only about 15 percent of homosexual students perceive their school counselors as being helpful with their problems and concerns.

Two additional ideas emerged as counselors were asked if they had any observations or opinions they would like to offer. First, one counselor indicated that students were “pretending” to be gay in school. There were two students in the school who displayed “gay characteristics”. They did not conform to their gender stereotypes. The counselor believed they did this to obtain attention from others. They did not belong to a clique at school, so the counselor believed they made themselves fit into the “homosexual clique”. Second, counselors indicated that some adolescents are teased and

harassed not because they are gay, but because their parents, siblings, or friends are gay. This population of adolescents seems to be invisible, as there is very little research pertaining to adolescents who have gay parents, siblings, or friends. It would be beneficial to focus on, or include these students in future studies.

School districts should consider developing systematic plans to address the topic of homosexuality. Strategies such as inservices, class curriculum, and visible support may be incorporated to increase awareness and tolerance of the homosexual community. It may also be beneficial for counselors and teachers to receive in-depth educational information during training.

There were limitations to this study that should be mentioned. First, the sample size of eighteen counselors was relatively small and does not allow results to be generalized to other Wisconsin schools. Second, this study involved interviewing counselors from public schools in Wisconsin. Private schools were not included. Last, counselors were not given time to prepare for the interviews. The researcher contacted them and they were asked to provide instant answers. They may have overlooked valuable information in the process.

Further investigation into prevention and intervention strategies is suggested with a wider sample of districts. It may be interesting to investigate private schools as well. In addition, studying homophobia and prevention strategies around the country may provide to be valuable. According to Owens (1996), southern and mid-western states have more negative attitudes toward homosexuality than the coastal states.

This study aimed to assess Wisconsin school counselor's perceptions of homophobia and prevention strategies in their districts. It may be useful to expand this

study to include student, parent, and administrative perceptions as well. It would be especially interesting to determine whether a correlation exists between homophobic levels of the school community (obtained from a Homophobia Inventory), and quality and quantity of prevention strategies utilized in school districts.

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Interview Questions

1. Are you aware of parents, teachers, students, administration, or counselors who are homosexual?
2. Has any one of these individuals identified themselves as homosexual to you?
3. Do you think you are a safe person to talk to about homosexual feelings and actions? Why or why not? How do students know that you are safe?
4. Are you aware of homophobic feelings or discriminatory actions against homosexuals in your school? If yes, please describe.
5. Wisconsin statutes prohibit pupil discrimination based on sexual orientation. What actions has your school taken to enforce the freedom of sexual orientation?
6. What strategies and resources are available to prevent or reduce homophobia in your school?
 - A) required or elective courses offered that address this issue
 - B) school related strategies and resources
 - C) community resources
7. How do students find out about the strategies and resources that are offered?
8. Are there any other observations or opinions you would like to offer? Any questions?

